

Jerrold Ottley interview with Mikaele Foley, 2005

Former Tabernacle Choir director Dr. Jerrold Ottley, who some may remember served as a senior educational missionary at BYU-Hawaii with his wife, Sister JoAnn Ottley, about 15 years ago, passed away on Feb. 19, 2021, in Salt Lake City, Utah. While in Laie, he taught the University Chorale and choral techniques, and his wife, a well-known soprano, taught French diction for singers and private voice lessons.

While many may remember Dr. Ottley's years from 1974-1999 as director of the world-famous Tabernacle Choir, some BYU-Hawaii alumni may not realize it was his strong ties to New Zealand that led him to cherish his missionary call to BYUH.

"As a young man my father, Sidney Ottley, served as a missionary in New Zealand; and later he was called to preside over the mission," Dr. Ottley recalled during a 2005 interview on campus. "I spent a year at that time finishing up my high school at Auckland Boys Grammar School," he recalled of this period.

"I also filled a building mission in Hamilton for a year in 1952. The temple wasn't even conceived at that point; they were in the early stages of building the college [CCNZ]," he continued. "When I turned 19, I was called on a [proselyting] mission in New Zealand. I spent a total of four years there."

He noted he spent most of his proselyting mission in the Northland area of New Zealand, and before that how he also had a pivotal experience conducting a labor missionary choir in Hamilton that led him to switch his previous interest in instrumental music to choirs. [See my comment below.]

In addition to his father and himself, his oldest brother, Warren Ottley Sr., served as a young missionary in New Zealand with President Mathew Cowley during World War II. His uncle Ernest Ottley, and cousins Glen, Ewart, and nephew Warren Ottley Jr. also served as missionaries in New Zealand. Warren Jr., a CCH alumnus, had passed away shortly before Dr. Ottley gave this interview; and Warren Jr.'s son, Michael-Warren "Like" Ottley, and late daughter Kahi Ottley are also BYU-Hawaii alumni.

After completing his mission and education, Dr. Ottley taught at the University of Utah and was also a Fulbright lecturer at the Academy of Music in Cologne, West Germany, before Church leaders asked him to take the helm of the Tabernacle Choir — a position he held for the next 25 years.

“Between the two of us, my wife and I have 69 years of service with the Tabernacle Choir,” Dr. Ottley said. “That involves being singers, me being the director, and she being the vocal soloist and director of the choir school.”

Following his retirement in 2000, he and his wife created, administered, and taught for the next four years in the Temple Square Choir Training School, and then he was called as bishop for his ward.

Not long after, he and Sister Ottley received a telephone call “asking us if we would consider coming to BYU-Hawaii. Because he had only recently been called as a bishop, “my initial thought was they would never let me ... but it went up the pipeline and was approved all the way.”

Dr. Ottley said he was thrilled. “There’s no question that with my love for Polynesia [from his New Zealand days], I jumped at it immediately,” and soon had the opportunity to renew some old acquaintances:

“John Elkington [who was working in the BYUH Housing department at the time of this interview] was a very small boy at the building site in Hamilton where I knew his father, grandfather, and a couple of his brothers when they were all serving there.” “There are other people here in Laie who are relatives of people whom I knew very, very well — second, and in some cases third-generation. I also knew a lot of Brother [Arapata] Meha’s family. He serves on the administrative staff here. I have also found several students who are children of people I knew very well in New Zealand.”

Of the 22 major tours he and his wife made with the Tabernacle Choir, Dr. Ottley commented on two during the interview:

The choir’s 1998 South Pacific tour provided his first opportunity in about 40 years to return to New Zealand. “As a high school boy, I attended concerts of the New Zealand National Symphony in Town Hall, Auckland, and when I went back in 1998, I conducted the choir on that same stage,” he said. “The reception was wonderful. It was a blessing to me to be able to share the choir with the people I loved so much.”

During that same tour, Dr. Ottley also conducted the choir in special concerts at BYU-Hawaii in the Cannon Activities Center and in Honolulu.

He also said the Tabernacle Choir’s trip to Israel at the invitation of Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek was an unforgettable highlight. Mayor Kollek had cooperated with the Church

and made it possible to build the BYU Center for Near Eastern Studies. “To solidify our presence there, he felt it would be a good idea for the choir to come and present the Church to the community at large.”

“We appeared in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa on that tour. We were warned that the response would be cool, but it was just overwhelming.” Dr. Ottley added he particularly remembers when the choir surrounded the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem and sang “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” which was filmed for television rebroadcast.

“Music has the capacity to open the emotions, and the emotions are one of the doorways to spirituality,” Dr. Ottley said. “The unfortunate thing is that we sometimes let the music stop at the emotional level and don’t move on to open the door to spirituality.”

“But if used appropriately, music is a powerful tool to let people connect with their own inner spirituality and the general spirituality of the universe.”